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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: MUSTAFA SARIGUL: ISTANBUL'S ENTERPRISING SISLI
MAYOR

Classified By: Consul General Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Sisli Mayor Mustafa Sarigul, one of a handful of Republican People's Party (CHP) mayors in all of Turkey, confidently predicts that AKP will dominate the next election, CHP leader Baykal thereafter will be ousted as party leader, and he, Sarigul, will then emerge to contest and win the Prime Minister's seat in 2011. Sarigul supports closer ties with the United States, development in southeast Turkey to improve life for Kurds, and reform of Turkey's internal political party laws. He is an eager politician, albeit limited in his exposure to national and international affairs. End summary.

¶2. (C) During a December 11 office call, Sarigul told us the next six months would be very important for the Prime Minister's Justice and Development Party (AKP). Implying something may yet go wrong though AKP now appears well positioned for national elections next year, he noted that AKP is responsible for 2008 of some 2500 city halls in Turkey. The electorate, he said, was not happy with the Prime Minister or his party; Turks want an effective leader whom they can love. Sarigul said he would have no problem with an Erdogan presidency, as long as it were balanced by his own election as PM.

¶3. (SBU) Alluding to problems within the CHP, Sarigul said his party may sink yet lower; party activists displeased with party leader Baykal do nothing about it. Sarigul had himself challenged Baykal twice for party leadership, holding party meetings outside the formal party apparatus and was expelled for his trouble. He hinted this could happen again.

¶4. (C) Turkey's problem, Sarigul suggested, is the sense of entitlement of its entrenched politicians. He would magnanimously step aside, were a more successful leader to emerge -- unlike Baykal and all other current party leaders. Successful passage of unpopular legislation in pursuit of EU accession gave Sarigul hope that similar external pressures could have a reforming impact on Turkey's internal politics. Sarigul also pressed the need for courageous reforms on issues ranging from Kurds to foreign affairs. Terming it Ataturk's most important dream, he called for a stronger Turkey-U.S. alliance, and lambasted CHP and other politicians critical of the U.S. Playing to his audience, Sarigul asserted that one of the difficult variables affecting EU accession was the lack of clear EU leadership and direction, whereas the United States had true sovereignty, "individual freedom of decision," and could commit as a full partner. This was important to Turkey and made the EU a bit less important for Turks.

¶5. (SBU) Sarigul said he would continue to challenge Baykal's CHP leadership. Baykal had planted the party's electoral hopes in nationalism. Sarigul by contrast would focus on

raising living standards in the 21 cities of the southeast through greater investment in infrastructure and better opportunity for expression in the Kurdish language. Sarigul envisioned a CHP reaching out to Alevis, Kurds and other minorities, similar to what AKP has done with its big tent approach to politicking.

¶6. (C) Sarigul himself addressed the elephant in the room. If only he were having this conversation a few years before when he had received a voluntary visitor grant to the U.S., he "would be prime minister today." A State Department interpreter, he said, had lodged a complaint against him during the visit; he went on to lose the CHP leadership by some 100 votes.

¶7. (C) Comment: Sarigul has no shortage of ego or energy; twice during our discussion, he literally leapt to his feet to make a rhetorical point. Having decided on a career in politics at 18 years of age, he is determined to play a national role and makes himself as visible as possible at major public events: he attended the December Papal mass in the front row (his mother-in-law is a German Christian) and served as a pallbearer for recently deceased Atlantic Records mogul Ahmet Ertegun.

¶8. (C) Comment continued: Missteps notwithstanding, he has proven a successful, visible, even popular mayor in Sisli -- one of Istanbul's "Gold Coast" municipalities. One of the secrets to his success is perhaps contained in an anecdote

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shared with the CG by a close advisor to the Prime Minister, who said that once on a flight accompanying Tayyip Erdogan and his wife, Emine, the advisor had made a derogatory comment about Sarigul and his enormous ambition. Mrs. Erdogan, normally passive in the company of the PM's

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advisors, had intervened to ask that the advisor not criticize Sarigul. When he asked why, she explained that when Erdogan had been imprisoned in the late 1990s, Sarigul had called to offer his help should the family be in need. "Of course he would call," the advisor had scoffed, "he's a politician." "At least he called to offer," the PM's wife replied, "which is more than any of our friends did."

¶9. (C) Comment continued: Sarigul's linkage of his 2004 IV program incident to his defeat for CHP party leadership in January 2005 -- whatever the true nature of "the incident" may have been -- underscores the importance he attaches to his relationship with the United States and his belief that foreign intervention will be necessary to break the stranglehold of CHP's very non-democratic internal politics. Ever looking for a nod from the U.S. to further his ambitions, Sarigul was doubtless disappointed by our refusal to endorse his political ambitions, other than to encourage a dynamic political pluralism in Turkey. End comment.

JONES